

Transcript of remarks by Deputy Administrator Dr. John Clifford  
for the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service  
Technical Briefing  
Washington D.C.  
June 30, 2004

MR. ED CURLETT: "Hello. Again, this is Ed Curlett with APHIS, USDA Public Affairs. I'd like to welcome everyone to today's briefing. I'd like to remind folks that today's briefing is for media, so when we get to the question and answer period of this briefing we ask that media be allowed to ask their questions.

"Today I have with me Dr. John Clifford. He's the chief veterinary officer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Today he'll be making an opening statement, and then we'll take some questions.

"And with that, also I want to add that we will be providing a full transcript of today's briefing on the web afterwards.

"So with that, I'd like to turn this over to Dr. John Clifford."

DR. JOHN CLIFFORD: "Thanks, Ed. And thank you, everyone for joining us this afternoon.

"Today at about 3:40 p.m. we received results from our National Veterinary Services Lab regarding the inconclusive screening test result we reported on June 25th. And that particular result is negative for BSE upon confirmatory testing.

"The confirmatory test used by our National Veterinary Services Lab was the immunohistochemistry test, an internationally recognized gold standard for BSE testing.

"This animal was negative for BSE. No further details such as to what type of animal it was, where the animal came from, or what lab did the testing would not be disclosed.

"Additionally as reported on our website yesterday, we received news of another inconclusive screening test result, and the result was reported yesterday at about 5:00 p.m. to us. The carcass of this animal has been accounted for and has not entered the human or feed chain.

"As was the case with our first inconclusive screening test, the sample in question will undergo confirmatory testing at our National Veterinary Services Lab.

"We expect to have those results back to us in four to seven days. We will announce the test results then on that particular sample, and if the test comes back positive for BSE we will of course provide additional information about the animal and its origin.

"I want to reiterate that an inconclusive result on a screening test does not mean we have found another case of BSE in the U.S. This has been illustrated already by our first inconclusive result being confirmed negative.

"And again, I would like to make a couple of points that we at USDA want to emphasize. No matter how the confirmatory test comes back, USDA remains confident in the safety of our U.S. beef supply. Again, this animal did not enter the human food

chain or the feed supply and provides protection to public health as well as animal health should another case of BSE ever be detected in the U.S.

"I also want to take this opportunity to clarify the chain of events that leads to a sample being sent to our National Veterinary Services Laboratory. It's actually pretty simple.

"If a screening test is inconclusive it will be sent to NVSL for confirmatory testing. Additional screening tests are conducted on the sample in question by both the approved lab and National Veterinary Services Lab. Those additional tests are used for quality assurance and informational purposes.

"USDA will conduct confirmatory testing on any inconclusive screening test even if a follow-up screening test sample were to be negative.

"APHIS will continue to regularly post testing results from its enhanced BSE surveillance program on its website and proactively report inconclusive results the day they are received, and actually today as of last Monday of June 28th, we reported 8,585 negative cases on our website."

"We're ready to open it up for questions."

OPERATOR: "Thank you, sir. At this time if you'd like to ask a question, please press @1 on your touchtone keypad. If you are using speaker equipment, you may need to lift your handset prior to pressing #1. To withdraw your question, please press #2.

One moment please while the questions register. Our first question is from Steve Kay of Cattle-Buyers Weekly. "

QUESTION: "Dr. Clifford, I take your point that you said no further details will be disclosed. However, can you make any comment that this animal involved in the first inconclusive was a 16 to 17-month-old Holstein animal that was tested at UC Davis?

"And my second question is, in the light of these two inconclusives in just four days, can you tell me whether USDA-APHIS is looking at the possibility of expanding the types of rapid tests that are being used? And can you tell us which ones are being used, whether just one test is being used at all at all the laboratories so far, or more than one?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Thank you for the questions, and with regards to the first question, no, we would not be releasing any type of additional information relative to the negative. It's important to note that we actually have as we indicated last Monday, 8,585 negative samples and we wouldn't be releasing that type of information on all those samples.

"However, if we do have a positive animal we would be releasing the information on those."

"With regards to the type of testing, test that's being used, actually there were five particular tests that have been licensed, have gone through rigorous protocols through our Centers for Veterinary Biologics for Licensing. Five tests actually have been licensed, and one of those particular tests has gone through a field-testing in order to be used. And the other four additionally are going through that same testing, or field test."

OPERATOR: "Thank you, sir. Our next question is from Mark Kaufman with

the Washington Post."

QUESTION: "Yes, thank you."

"In terms of the process now by which animals are selected for testing, could you just walk us through that a little bit? What is the pool of animals that are being tested right now?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Actually there are two major pool of animals in our expanded BSE surveillance testing program. The largest pool is those we refer to internally here as the high-risk population. These would be animals that would show central nervous system signs, animals that would be, died from unknown causes or animals that are nonambulatory.

"We are also testing a population of 20,000 healthy animals throughout the country, and also we include in that other animals, some animals that are antemortem condemns as well."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Mike McGinnis with DTN."

MR. CURLETT: "Operator, with that, I would ask folks to speak up a little bit because we're having a little bit of trouble hearing some of the questions. So with that we'll take the next question."

OPERATOR: "Thank you, sir. Our next question is from Leah Ward with Yakima Herald Republic. "

QUESTION: "Yes, hi. Doctor, can you be more specific about the age and the physical condition of most of the animals tested so far? Are they showing up for slaughter in a nonambulatory position? "

DR. CLIFFORD: "Basically, as we'd indicated earlier, we're not going to release that type of information unless we had an inconclusive that would be reported out as positive. I think you know it's important to note that as previously stated most of the samples we're looking for is in the high-risk population. As I indicated these would be a whole class of type of animals-- an animal that's died from unknown causes, any type of central nervous system sign or animals that are what we refer to as "downers" or nonambulatory."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Benjamin Romano with Yakima Herald Republic News."

QUESTION: "Hi. Thanks very much. I was wondering if you could tell us, what is the expected rate of false positives with the rapid screening testing used right now? And also of the five that you mentioned earlier, if you could identify the one that's being used?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Yes. We can identify the one that's being used. The one that's being used is the biorad test, the ELISA, the ELISA test. With regards to statistics, we prefer to not put any type of statistics on that. You can look at some of these tests and their use internationally, but I think we need to have that experience here with the U.S. and the population of animals that we're testing before we would prefer to give any type of statistical numbers."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Andy Dworkin with the Oregonian."

QUESTION: "Hi. Thanks for having this call."

"I just wanted to clarify one thing really quick and then ask the question. The clarification is, did I understand that you guys are going to continue to report every inconclusive test for the life of this expanded program?"

"And then the question was, it looks like you guys are up to a rate of almost 3,000 a week by the fourth week, the week that just ended. Is that the full, up to the full rate of testing now that you're going to have, or do you need to get more samples and expand that further to be up to hit your targets?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "I'm sorry. The question wasn't clear to me. Are you asking the sample, the number of samples that we've collected so far? And --"

QUESTION: "Well, over the, from what you posted on your site it looks like over the four weeks of June that you've been doing it, the first week you had about 1,200 samples that tested. And then it increased through June; whereas, this past week you tested about almost 3,000 samples, 2,917 and --"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Okay."

QUESTION: "Is that a full rate, is what I'm asking."

DR. CLIFFORD: "No, it's not. Basically as we indicated we began our expanded BSE surveillance program June 1, and we're continually, if you'll look at the numbers on the weekly basis you'll continue to see those numbers increase. And we would expect that to continue to increase for quite a bit of time."

"Plus there's seasonal issues there where you'll probably see a greater number in the fall and winter months than you would oftentimes see in the summer months."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Donald McNeil (sp) with the New York Times."

QUESTION: "Hi, Dr. Johnson. Dr. Clifford, sorry. Because there's been some feeling that the USDA labs are not entirely independent of the cattle industry, is there going to be any effort to send this sample out to another lab for confirmation of the negative, say to the same lab in Britain this was sent to last time, the cow in December?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "No, not-- the inconclusives are going to National Veterinary Services Lab, and they will be running the confirmation test which is the internationally recognized gold standard. That laboratory is our laboratory located in Ames, Iowa. Those samples would not be sent to Weybridge on the inconclusives."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Daniel Goldstein with Bloomberg News."

QUESTION: "Yeah, hi, Dr. Clifford."

"How many tests exactly were run on the screening test before it was sent off to Ames?"

"And secondly, are you identifying the birth cohort of the animals if you do find an inconclusive?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Basically on the inconclusives, what we are doing initially because we recognize that these animals or these samples are inconclusive we will do some initial beginning epidemiology internal, waiting for that final result to occur."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Jeff Isshu (sp) with On The Farm Radio."

QUESTION: "Dr. Clifford, good afternoon, and thank you for taking our questions. "

DR. CLIFFORD: "Good afternoon."

QUESTION: "I'm curious about what's going on at the state level, and I understand that you cannot identify the state or the states that are involved with these two cases. But how is the USDA working with the state Department of Agriculture? And if there were a positive case, would you contemplate any kind of ban on the state-to-state movement of live cattle?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "We're working very closely with our State Departments of Agriculture on the BSE surveillance plan. We have weekly calls with our counterparts on the state side, and that's a relationship that's very important to us and needed."

"No, we would not place a ban on any state with regards to a positive BSE case. We would be looking at the particular animal and any animals that may have been contaminated with feed at that time, as well as the offspring of that infected animal."

"Basically, producers-- I think if you look at the case that happened in Washington State, producers' concerns, while very important, should be minimal from a standpoint of concerns of long terms of quarantines because actually the quarantine period should be very, very short; and we would only be removing those animals that are absolutely necessary. Unlike other types of eradication and control programs you're not going in necessarily and destroying or removing the entire herd."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Betsy Friese with Successful Farming Magazine."

QUESTION: "Hi. Some of my concerns have been addressed already. However, I guess I'll ask a question from the farmer's standpoint. Why are these inconclusive tests being released to the public when now we know that many of them probably will come up negative? Is there any discussion of this?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Yes. There's a lot of discussion around that. And you know, I think the most important thing is the Department, USDA wants to be very transparent with this issue. And because we've got a test and hold procedure out there, we're going to have carcasses held while these inconclusive tests are being sent to our National Veterinary Services Lab which takes four to seven days, and we realize that information like that may be leaked. And we want to be very open and transparent, and that's why the decision was made to release this type of information."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Susan Cachinskas (sp) with Internet News."

QUESTION: "Hi, there. Thanks for taking my question. So APHIS recently announced that it's accepting funding applications from states and tribal governments to begin implementing the National Animal Identification System. Do you have any idea when we might actually have a system working?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Well, I think -- yes, we are accepting those applications or requests now for proposals for cooperative agreements with the states. And that process-- we'll probably be awarding those in August."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Randy Fabi with Reuters."

QUESTION: "Hi. Yeah, the reason USDA has given for publishing these inconclusives was to avoid market rumors. But since Friday markets have been rampant with rumors on the location, the age, other screening tests on these animals.

"And could you explain the irony in your decision-making, especially with USDA constantly saying that they want to be fully transparent?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Well, basically as we said before we wanted to be transparent, and we want to minimize the impacts upon the markets. We feel like that after we get this information out there a couple of times that hopefully it will continue to minimize that impact."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Sally Schuff with Feedstuffs Newspaper."

QUESTION: "Yes. Dr. Clifford, thank you so much for taking our call. My question is, have you conducted a second screening test yet on the second inconclusive? And if so, are you reporting that?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "No. We're not reporting the second test. We're using that internally for quality assurance purposes, and we're only going to report the gold standard test, the immunohistochemistry."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Joe Palco (sp) with National Public Radio."

QUESTION: "Hi. Thanks for doing this call. On the same topic, I just want to be clear that any inconclusive test is sufficient grounds to send off to the confirmatory tests, and whether or not as I understand it in Europe if a second test in the screening comes up or two subsequent tests and screenings come up negative, usually they do not send off for confirmation.

So are you moving to that kind of an approach, or are you going to be more cautious and send anything that's positive?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Well, I think -- you know, the tests are being used in various ways in different countries. This is the way right now that we're using this test with regards to the U.S."

OPERATOR: "Our next question is from Peter Shinn with National Association of Farm Broadcasters."

QUESTION: "Thank you very much, and good afternoon, Dr. Clifford. I know that you said earlier that you would not disclose your thoughts about the number of inconclusive tests that might result given the volume of testing that you're doing. But J.B. Penn earlier this week said that he anticipated one inconclusive test every 10,000 tests.

"And so I'm wondering if you would agree or disagree with Under Secretary Penn's assessment?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Well, I think that number has been put out there before as well, and really that particular number is referring to the Japanese and what they had found. And I think that's one of the things we didn't want to specifically say that that's the kind of numbers we would see in the U.S. because the Japanese are testing a different class of animals than what we're testing, and we could see results that differ from what they're seeing. That's why we didn't want to put a specific statistical number out there."

MR. CURLETT: "Operator, we have time for two more questions."

OPERATOR: "Thank you. Our next question is from Chris Nixon with Fuji TV Japan."

QUESTION: "Good afternoon, Dr. Clifford. Thanks for holding this press conference. We were just wondering, how will this negative result affect the U.S.-Japan meeting taking place in Ft. Collins this week?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "I didn't hear it. I'm sorry. Could you repeat the question?"

QUESTION: "I'm sorry, sir. I'm on a cell phone. How do you feel this negative result will affect the U.S.-Japan meetings taking place this week in Ft. Collins?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "We don't think that that would affect that meeting. Basically we talked to our trading partners about the reporting in inconclusives, and they understand what the test is and the meaning of an inconclusive."

OPERATOR: "Our final question is from Jerry Hagstrom with Congress Daily."

QUESTION: "Yes. Dr. Clifford, I'm very curious that you said you received the lab test this afternoon at 3:40, but yet last night USDA announced that this press conference would be held at 4:30 today. This raises a question of, you know, when do you actually learn these things so that these press conferences have been established?"

"And also, who do you inform before you inform the media of what the results are? I'm referring to organizations like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association or the American Meat Institute, RCALF, anybody like that?"

DR. CLIFFORD: "Well, sir, as previously stated, I received the information that the immunohistochemistry test was negative at 3:40 today. You know, I recognized that there was a possibility that test would be ready today but did not have the exact time for that. And that information has not been released to anyone prior, except internally prior to this media event."

OPERATOR: "At this time I'd like to turn the conference back over to Dr. Clifford and Mr. Curlett for any closing remarks."

MR. CURLETT: "This is Ed Curlett. I'd like to thank everybody for being on the briefing today. You can find a full transcript of today's briefing at [WWW.USDA.GOV](http://WWW.USDA.GOV). And further briefings will be announced on the web as necessary.

"Thank you very much everybody."